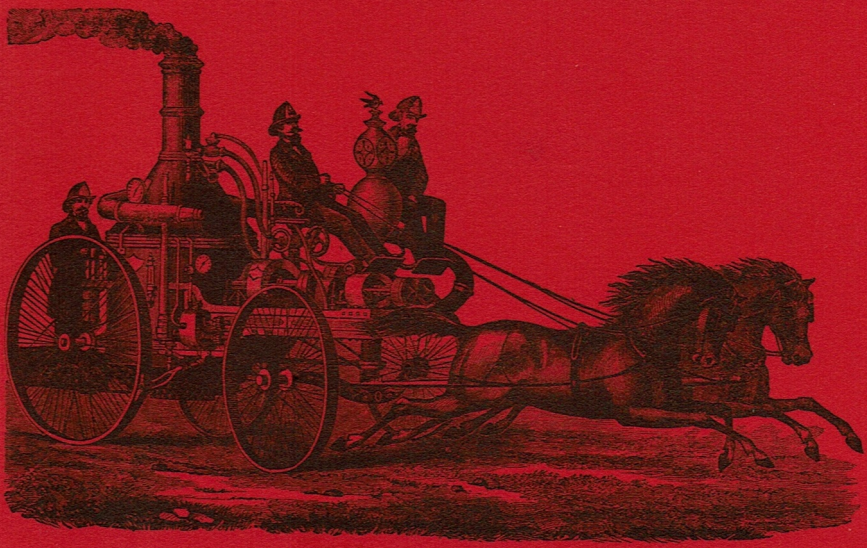
Fire Fighting of Long Ago



Americana Review

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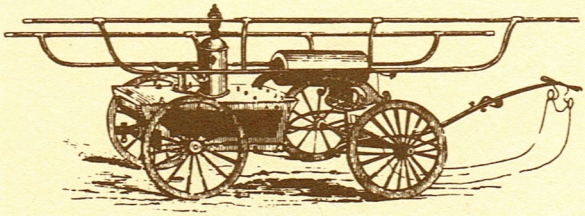

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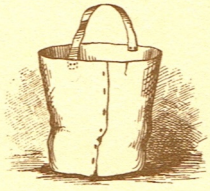
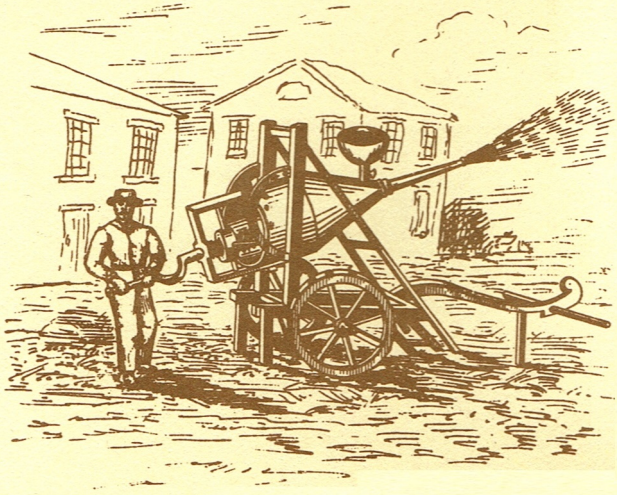
Americana Review

The Early Days

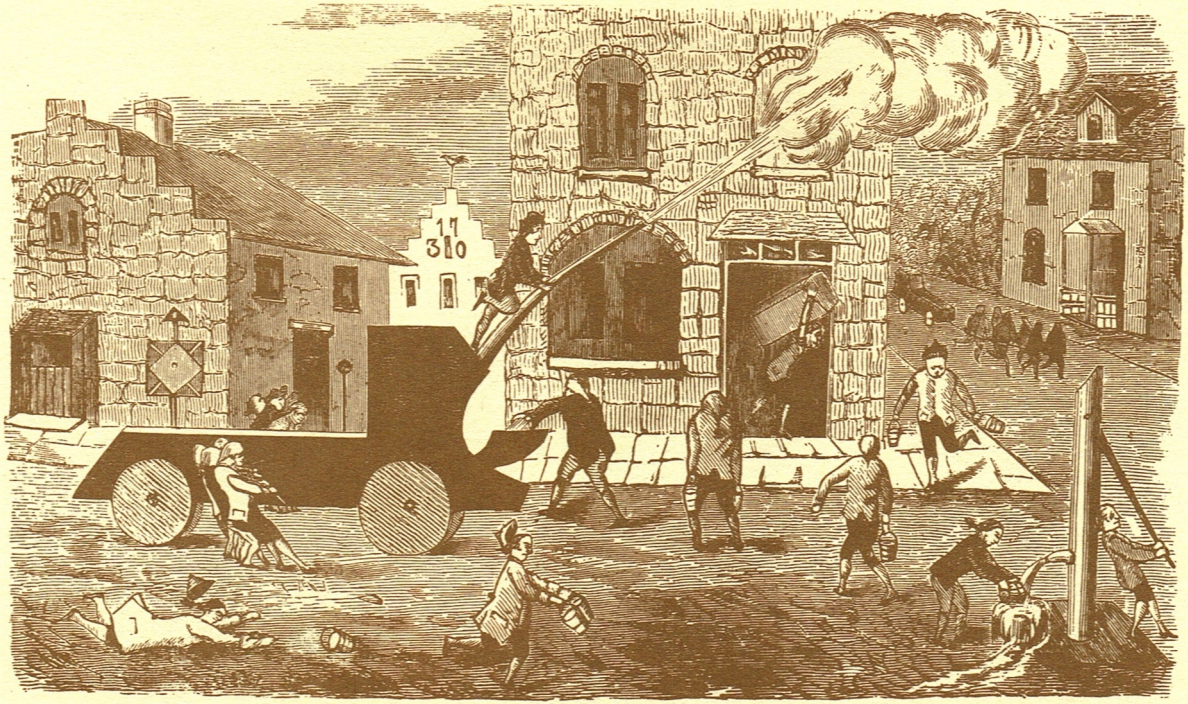
In tracing the history of fire fighting, a journal of 1872 has noted that during the middle ages, the chief means used as a protection against fire was prevention. The curfew bell was the signal given in early evening for extinguishing all fires used for domestic purposes, the term being derived from the French *couvre feu,* meaning cover the fire.



The primitive water bucket, along with today's more sophisticated modern buckets of metal and plastic, is a reminder that fire continues its dual role of fine servant and awesome master.

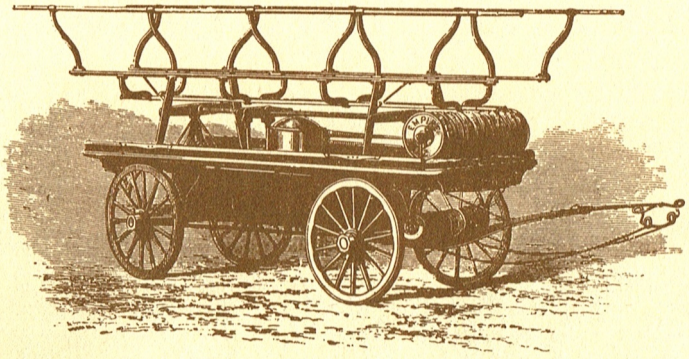


This strange device is a syringe, or "instrument for fires." They appeared in several German cities in the 16th century. Eventually, some syringes, using an eight-foot-long barrel and a piston forced up by a large crew of men, could throw a stream of water one inch in diameter a distance of eighty feet.



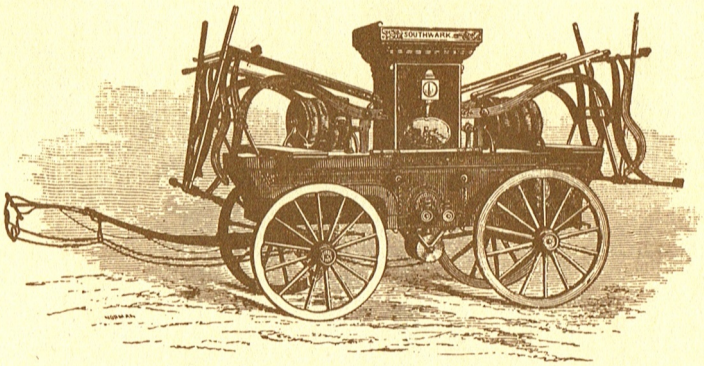
A New York fire engine of 1730, its syringe-like operation most dependent upon manpower, buckets, and a nearby pump. As early as 1697, a local court appointed two "viewers of chimneys and hearths" for every ward of the city, and provided fines for those who failed to clean chimneys and mend hearths adequately.

Another New York fire engine scene, this one in 1733. That same year, a committee ordered a "person or persons" to put the fire engines in good order, and also to look after the same, "that they may be always in good plight and condition, and fit for present use."



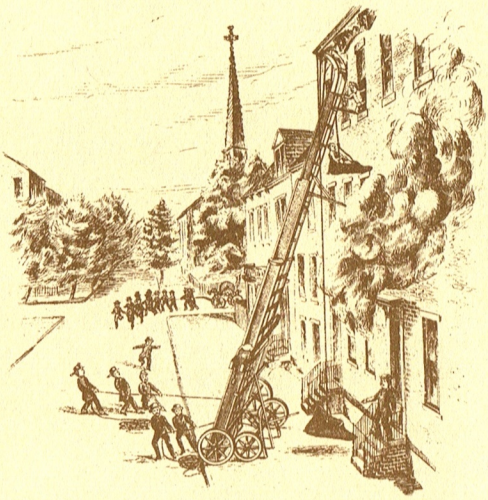
In the late 1700's and early 1800's, the hand engine replaced the primitive syringes and siphons. This is the so-called "hay-wagon" of New York City's Exempt Engine Company. It was eventually sold to the U.S. Government for use at Fortress Monroe, when it was thought the rebels might try to burn the fortress.

In New York City's old Volunteer Fire Department, engine-house entertainment involved singing or story-telling, but no drinking, sleeping, eating or misbehaviour. In December of 1829, Engine Company 13 noted that fireman Williams was chewing tobacco, and only two days later Washington Van Wyck was reported for smoking in the engine house. At the same time, a steward was appointed to furnish the fire company with liquor at the actual fires, and in the winter some firemen poured rum or brandy into their boots to keep their feet from freezing.



Southwark Engine, No. 38, a so-called "double-decker" engine of the mid-nineteenth century, was used in New York City, but its appearance is that of the popular "Philadelphia" style engine of that period.

Old Fire Escapes



By 1892, the U.S. Patent Office had granted more than a thousand patents for various fire escapes, of which two are shown. Above, an escape ladder — a rather cumbersome contraption from 1857, and below, a hoist device from 1868.

While fire escape paraphenalia has included everything from chutes to safety nets, the design of a building has always played a more basic and critical role in overall safety considerations.

Old Fire Extinguishers

Chemical fire extinguishers ejecting water, a saline solution, or carbonic gas, also came into usage during the 19th century. The portable type in use by these erstwhile firemen shows a patent of 1868. Extinguishers during this time varied in size from small grenade-like devices to large chemical tanks carried by wagons.

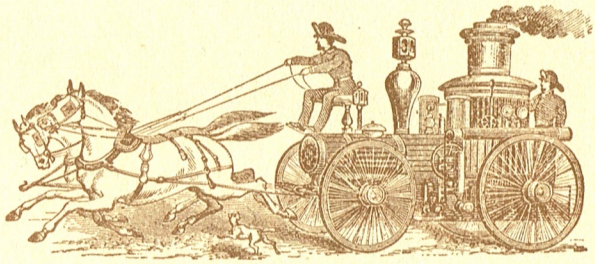
The Steam Fire Engine Arrives

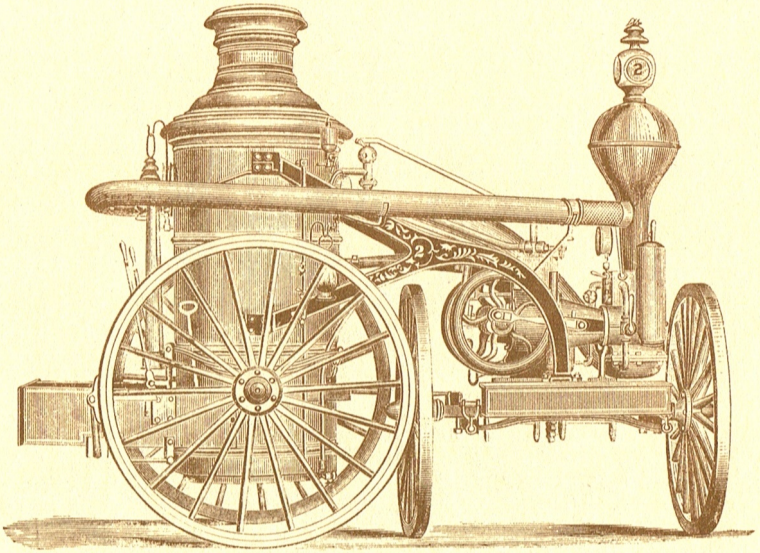
The first steam fire engine was built in London in 1830, by a man named Braithwaite, but progress in this endeavor was slow at this time. Using an upright boiler, Mr. Braithwaite's engine weighed more than five thousand pounds, generated steam after some twenty minutes, and could send about 150 gallons of water a minute from 80 to 90 feet high. The engine was planned by John Ericsson, the Swedish born engineer who would one day design the famous American ironclad, the Monitor.

But, as one author put it more than a hundred years ago, "the great desideratum in a machine for extinguishing fires is the rapidity with which it can be set to work, and next to this the quantity of water it will throw to a given height or distance."

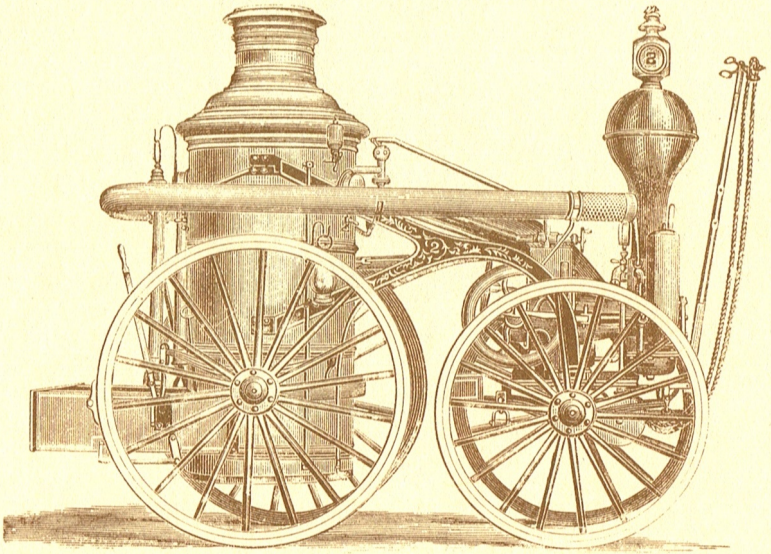
By 1841, Mr. Hodges of New York had built a steam engine for that city, but its extreme weight made it difficult to handle, and the real advances came when the city of Cincinnati determined to have a steam fire department. Mr. Latta, in behalf of this effort, came up with a design in which the steam aided the propulsion of the vehicle, but even so, four horses were required to pull the twelve ton rig.

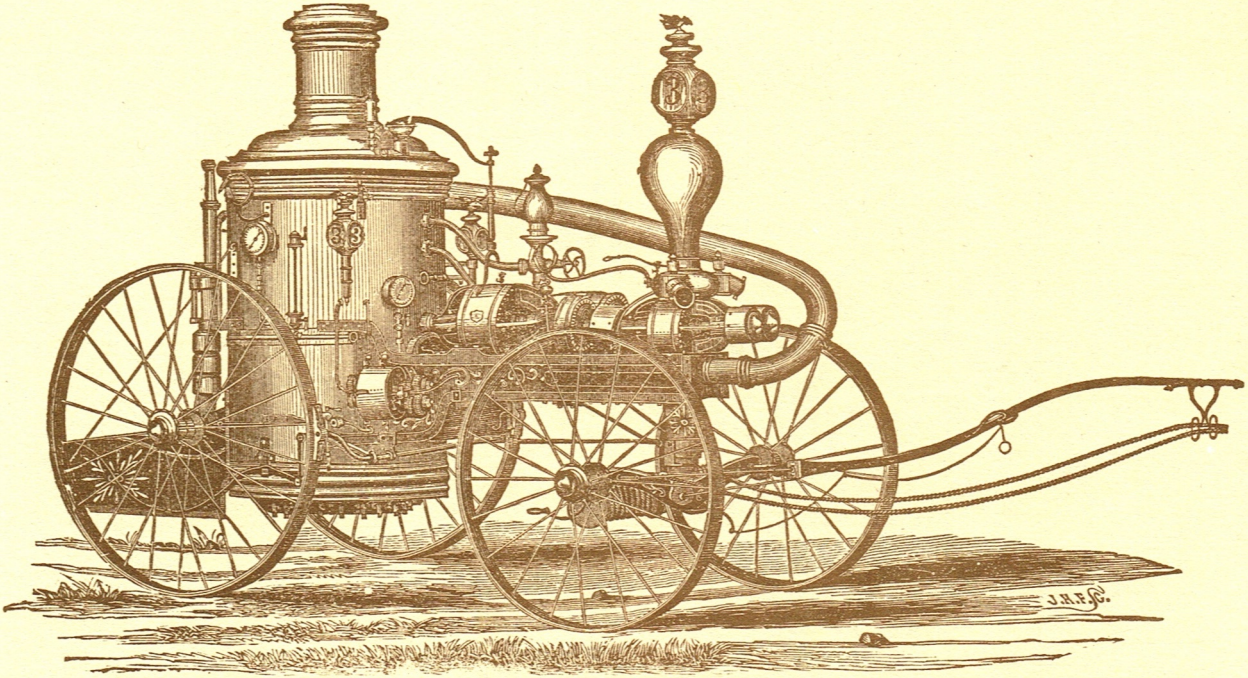
In 1858, Boston authorities conducted competitive steam fire engine trials. An entry from Lawrence, Massachusetts weighed only 7300 pounds, and the same manufacturer demonstrated the raising of steam to sixty pounds pressure from cold water in only ten-and- a-half minutes. Other entrants showed leadership with a vertical water throw of 125 feet, and capacities as high as 345 gallons per minute. The steam fire engine was making rapid strides, and finding wide acceptance.



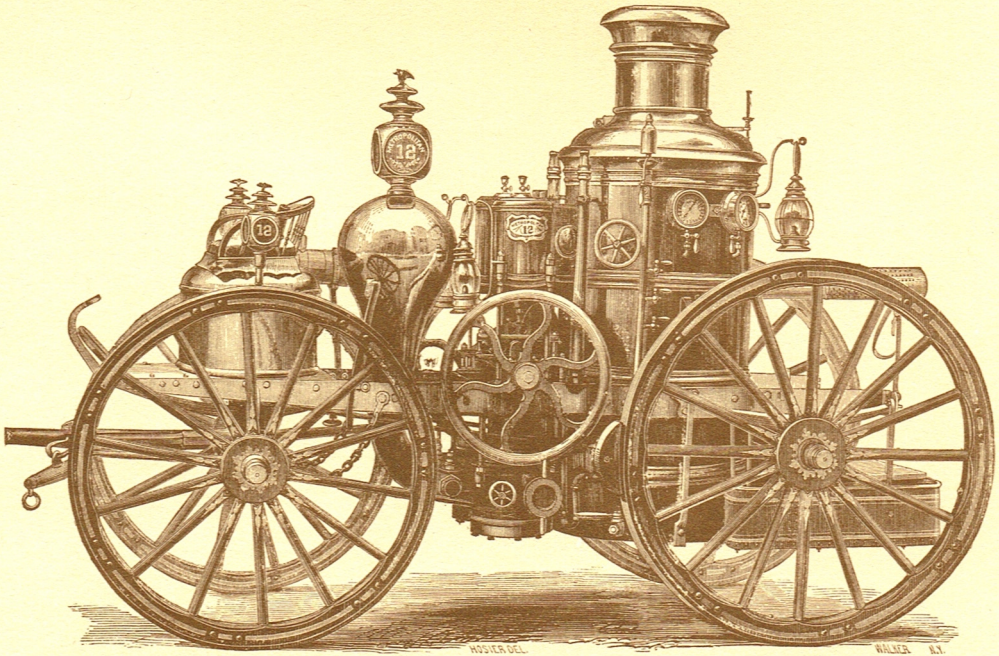


Two steam fire engines from the Button Engine Works of Waterford, N.Y. Mr. Button pioneered many improvements in earlier engines, pumps, and valves, and his steam engines won broad acceptance in the United States and Canada.





Another leading manufacturer of 19th century hand steam fire engines was the Silsby Manufacturing Company of Seneca Falls, N.Y. Horse-drawn engines weighed 5800 pounds ready for service, while those to be drawn by men weighed 4300 pounds, complete with fuel, water, hose, and other necessities.



This smart-looking steamer is one of several hundred made by the Amoskeag Manufacturing Company of Manchester, New Hampshire. An 1867 book reported that their vertical cylinders and pumps help avoid shaking that was objectionable in some other machines.

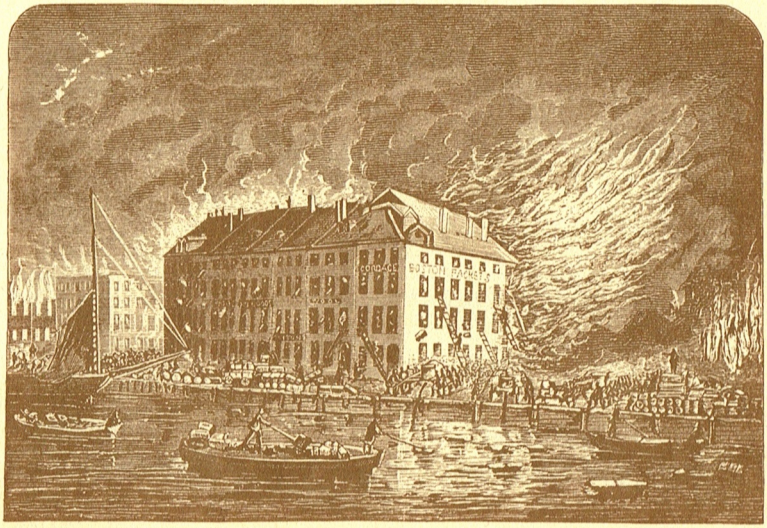
Great Fires

The illustrations and text which follow highlight some of the major fires that shocked many American communities in the 19th Century. Despite the terrifying losses of life and property, and the demands placed upon firefighters of the era, most of these disasters did have the positive effect of increased public interest in proper fire prevention and control, innovations in fire fighting equipment, and new support for both volunteer and regular fire departments.

Wall Street aflame during New York's great fire of 1835. Headlines were almost as awesome as the fire itself:

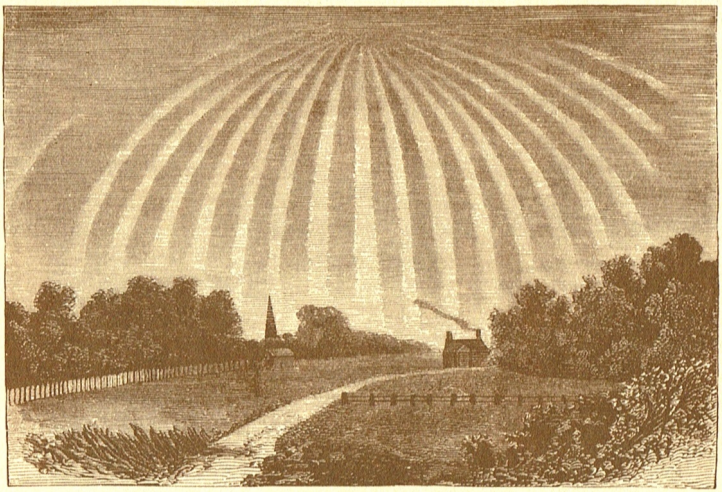
Unparalleled destructiveness—Resistless devastation for sixteen hours—Pall of ruin and desolation—Seven hundred warehouses laid in ashes—Mingled horror and sublimity.

The December 16 fire broke out in sub-zero weather, destroying the Merchants' Exchange, Post Office, and several churches and banks. High winds hampered the valiant efforts of the firemen.



A view of the huge New York conflagration of 1835, from Coenties slip. Dynamiting of some buildings was carried out as a means of controlling the flames. Below, the ruins of the Merchants' Exchange.

Washington D.C. was burned by the British in 1814. So indignant was the nation's press that sixty-five years later one history book described the British attack as "a carnival of violence and plunder as would disgrace even the Thugs of India." Another bad fire hit the Capital in 1836, when flames destroyed the Post Office, Patent Office, and several other buildings.



The spectacular display of the Aurora Borealis November 14, 1837, brought amazement and the calling out of the New Haven fire department — perhaps the most unusual false alarm of all time.

BURNING OF THE CITY OF CHICAGO, THE COMMERCIAL METROPOLIS OF THE NORTHWEST. 1871

Most Destructive Conflagration in the History of Civilized Nations.—A Thirty Hours' Tornado of Fire in all Directions.—Vast Billows of Inextinguishable Flame.—Upwards of Two Thousand Acres, or Seventy-three Miles of Streets, with 17,450 Buildings, Destroyed: Loss, $200,000,000.—Ignoble Origin of the Fire.—Fatal Mistake of a Policeman.—Combustibles all Around.—A Strong Gale Prevailing.—Frightful Rapidity of the Flames.—Destruction of the Water-Works.—Stores and Warehouses Swept Away.—Palaces and Hovels a Common Prey.—Engines Sent from Seven States.—The Midnight Scene.—Terror Indescribable.—Flight for Life.—Burning of the Bridges.—Helplessness, Desperation, Death.—Churches, Hotels, Theaters, in Ashes —Fate of the Newspapers, Banks, etc.—Explosion of the Gas-Works.—Tombs and Graves Consumed.—Most Ghastly Spectacle.—Nearly 100,000 Persons Homeless.—The Wail for Help.—A World's Sympathies Poured Forth.

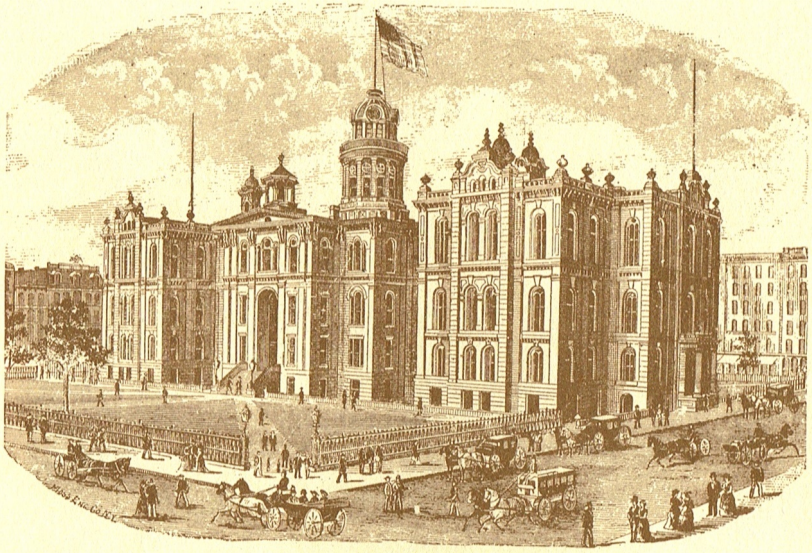
"Blackened and bleeding, panting, prone
On the charred fragments of her shattered throne,
Lies she who stood, but yesterday, alone."—BRET HARTE

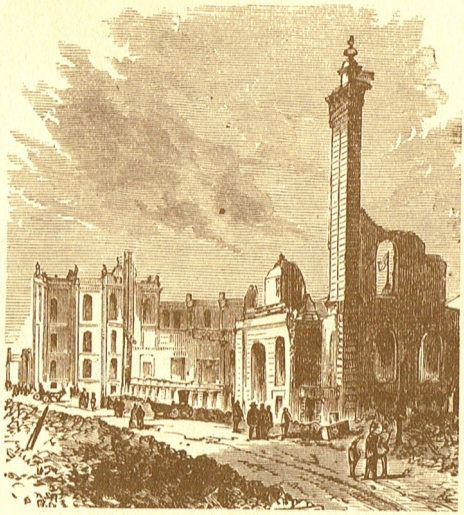
MR. OGDEN'S HOUSE UNTOUCHED IN THE MIDST OF THE GREAT FIRE.

ON Sunday and Monday, October eighth and ninth, 1871, there occurred in Chicago, the great commercial metropolis of the north-west, a fire unparalleled in the history of the world. The fire originated in a small frame structure in the rear of No. 137 DeKoven street, used as a cow-stable.

At the junction of the Chicago River, the flames

meet the shipping and destroy the grain elevators.





The Chicago Court House before the great fire of 1871 (above) and ruins of the Chamber of Commerce and Court House (right) following the fire. Because the building was in an open square, and well built, many people expected the Court House would survive, but a huge burning timber from a LaSalle Street building set the dome afire, as flames closed in from the south and west.

At 9:30 P.M. on the night of October 8, 1871, a policeman discovered a small fire on DeKoven Street. Unfortunately, he decided he could put it out without sounding an alarm — a fatal miscalculation.

A strong south-westerly wind was blowing at the time, no rain had fallen for several weeks previous; and consequently all combustible matter was prepared for ready ignition.

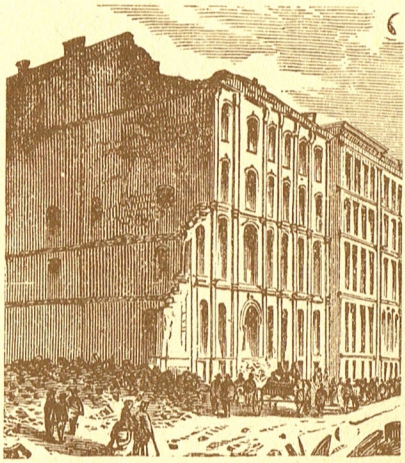
All the fire apparatus of the city was brought into requisition, and, considering the difficulties to be encountered, the courage and energy of the firemen could not be surpassed. They had just passed through a severe fire twenty-four hours previous, and part of the companies had left the scene of the Saturday night fire but a few hours, when they were again called, exhausted with hard labor, to this fearful scene.

The flames shot with frightful rapidity from house to house and from board-yard to board-yard, all human means appearing utterly powerless to stay their progress. Unfortunately, one of the first public buildings reached by the fire was the water-works; this cut off the water supply, rendering the fire department useless.

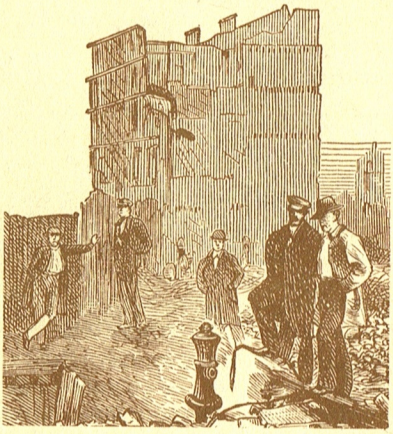
The awful gale which prevailed filled the air with live coals, and hurled to an immense distance, in every direction, blazing brands and boards, — a widespread besom of furious destruction. All of the leading banks of the city, several of the stone church edifices, costly and elegant in the extreme; the beautiful railroad depot of the Michigan Southern and the Rock Island railway companies, also that of the Illinois Central and the Michigan Central railroads; the court-house and the chamber of commerce; the Sherman, Tremont, Briggs, Palmer, Bigelow, Metropolitan, and several other hotels, as well as the gigantic Pacific, which was in process of construction; all the great newspaper establishments; the Crosby opera-house, McVicker's theater, and every other prominent place of amusement; the post-office, telegraph offices, Farwell hall, the magnificent Drake-Farwell block, the stately dry goods palaces of J.V. Farwell & Co., Field, Leiter & Co., scores of elegant residences in Wabash and Michigan avenues, numbers of elevators in which were stored millions of bushels of grain; in fact, all that the hand of man had fashioned or reared was completely swept away, as the fire madly rushed to the north.

With tremendous force, the mighty and uncontrollable element, rushing to the main channel of the river, near its entrance into Lake Michigan, consumed the bridges, and attacked the north division with relentless fury. All day it waged its work of devastation, advancing from street to street, over a vast surface, sparing scarcely anything. The destruction of palatial residences and magnificent churches continued, while stores and dwellings by the hundreds, together with the costly water-works, the north side gas-works, Rush medical college, the Chicago and North-western railway depot, several immense breweries, coal yards, lumber yards, and manufacturing establishments of various kinds, and in great numbers, yielded to the resistless enemy.

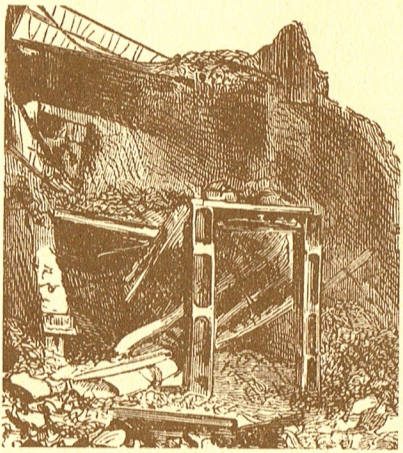
Chicago Ruins



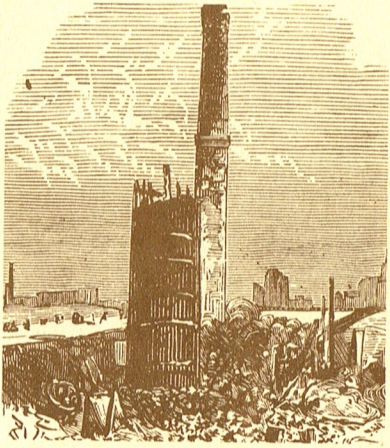
Republic Life Insurance Co.



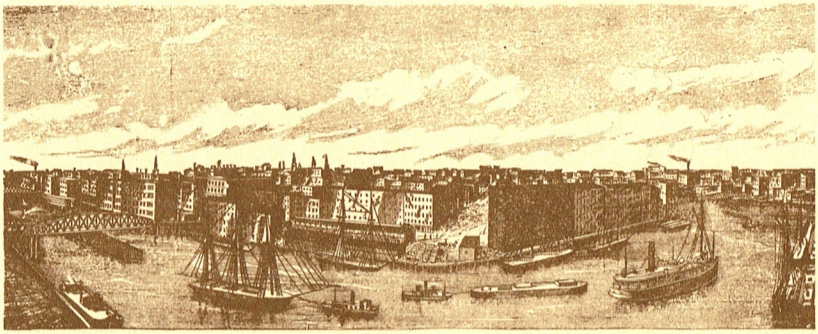
First National Bank



Illinois Central R.R. Office

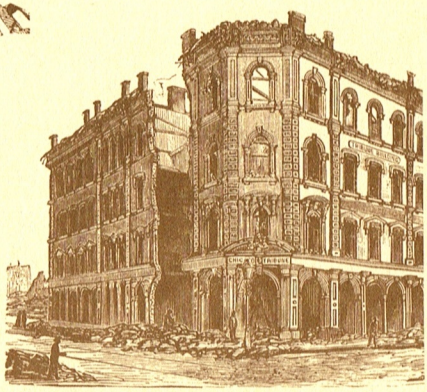


Crosby's Distillery



Wolf's Point—one year before the big fire.

Ruins of Field, Leiter & Co.'s Store.



Tribune building after the fire.

Other Great Fires

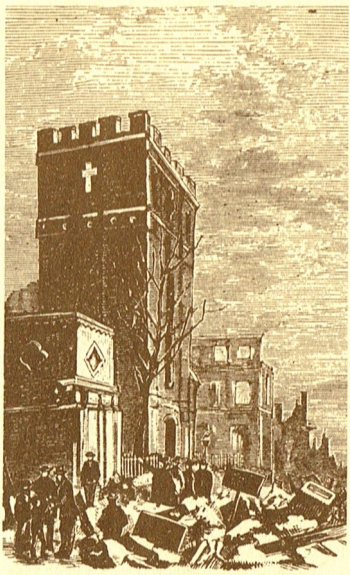
North of Green Bay, Wisconsin, almost across from Sturgeon Bay in that state's Eastern peninsula, lies the small community of Peshtigo. By 1870, some 2,000 people had established permanent homes in the pretty little town, now growing as a center for lumbering.

Today, relatively few people may identify little Peshtigo with the city of Chicago, and yet it was on that same tinder dry day of October 8, 1871, that an ongoing series of forest fires swept through much of northeastern Wisconsin, some areas of Michigan, in an awesome experience that took some 1,000 lives—with terrible losses centered about Peshtigo over a period of six days.

A Wisconsin house enveloped in flames, 1871.

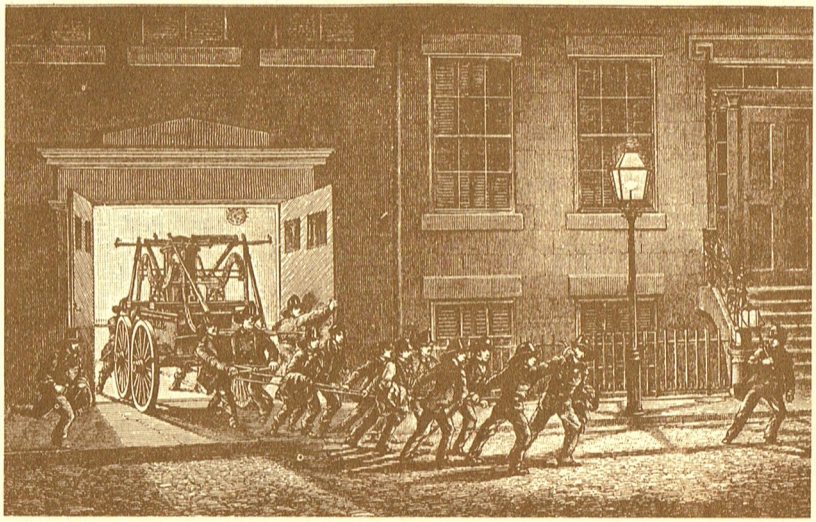
On November 9, 1872 — a little more than a year after the terrible Chicago fire, Boston suffered a fate that was nearly as frightening. Above is a rooftop view of the destruction which swept through a downtown area that included Summer, Franklin, Milk, Congress, Federal, and Devonshire Streets.

When it was all over, the numbers showed almost eight hundred buildings burned, including the Trinity church shown at the right, with total losses of some $85,000,000. As was the case in Chicago, there were many examples of heroism by firemen and citizens alike, along with looting by others.



Charleston, S. C., was, on the 27th of April, 1838, visited by one of the most destructive fires that have ever occurred in any city in this country. A territory equal to almost one-half of the entire city was made desolate. The fire broke out at a quarter past eight o'clock on the morning of the day mentioned, in a paint shop on King street, corner of Beresford, and raged until about twelve A.M. of the following day. It was then arrested by the blowing up of buildings in its path. There were 1,158 buildings destroyed, and the loss occasioned was about $3,000,000. The worst feature of the catastrophe was the loss of life which occurred while the houses were being blown up. Through the careless manner in which the gunpowder was used, four of the most prominent citizens of the city were killed and a number injured.

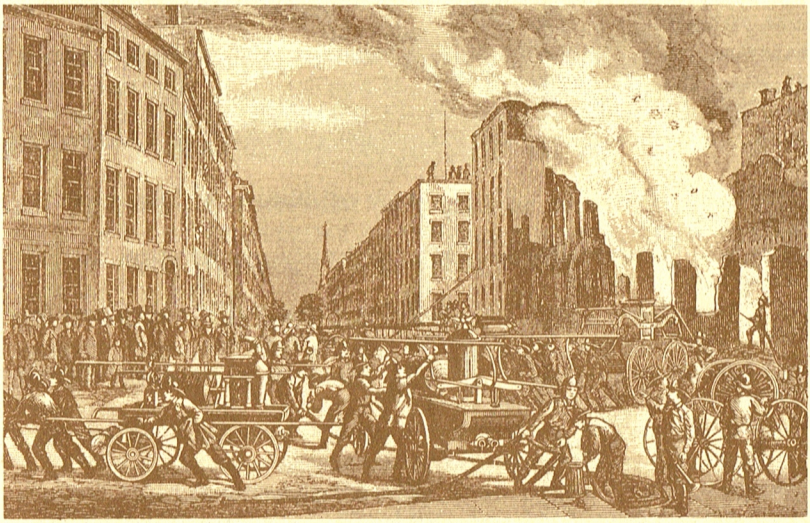
The account of the Charleston fire, above, was written shortly after the big Chicago fire of 1871. Below, A Currier and Ives lithograph of 1854—a night alarm.



PITTSBURG, Pa., was visited by a most destructive conflagration the 10th of April, 1845. By it a very lage portion of the city was laid waste, and a greater number of houses destroyed than by all the fires that had occurred previously to it. Twenty squares, containing about 1,100 buildings were burned over. Of these buildings the greater part were business houses containing goods of immense value—grocery, dry-goods, and commission houses—and the spring stocks of the latter had just been laid in. The fire commenced in a frame building at the corner of Second and Ferry streets, and the prevailing strong wind urged it with fearful rapidity through the city. So short was the time between the discovery of the flames and their spread through the city, that many persons were unable to save any of their household goods, while others, having got theirs to the walk, were compelled to flee and leave them to be seized and destroyed by the element.

The merchants were equally unsuccessful in saving anything from their warehouses. The loss was estimated at $10,000,000

The Pittsburgh fire of 1845, as described by a writer in 1871.



Another fine lithograph by Currier and Ives. Currier was an ardent and active fireman.

Great 19th Century American Fires

Albany, N.Y. — **1848**...600 buildings, piers, steamboats destroyed.

Boston, Mass. — **1872**...600 buildings burned, $75,000,000 property loss.

Brooklyn, N.Y. — **1848**...300 buildings destroyed. **1876**...295 lives lost in theatre fire.

Charleston, S.C. — **1838**...Almost half the city destroyed; careless use of gunpowder cost many lives.

Chicago, Ill. — **1868**...An entire block of Lake Street destroyed, with property loss of $3,000,000. **1871**...The Great Chicago Fire, in which 300 lost their lives, and some 18,000 buildings were destroyed.

Concord, N.H. — **1850**...The greater part of the business section burned.

Hinkley, MN — **1894**...Huge areas of forests burned, and more than 400 lives lost.

Milwaukee, WI — **1854**...A large part of the city was destroyed.

Montreal, Canada — **1852**...More than 1,000 houses destroyed, with a $5,000,000 property loss.

Nantucket, MA — **1846**...Some 300 buildings lost on July 13th.

New York, N.Y. — **1835**...More than 500 buildings destroyed, with a property loss of $20,000,000. **1845**...Some 300 buildings lost, from financial shrines to the "abodes of the poverty-stricken." **1889**...A major hotel fire cost 45 lives.

Peshtigo, WI — **1871**...1,000 people died from awful forest fires.

Philadelphia, PA — **1850**...Combustibles helped cause the loss of 30 lives. **1865**...A dangerous coal-oil fire, with 20 people "roasted" in the streets or homes.

Pittsburgh, PA — **1845**...More than 1,100 buildings lost, filled with groceries and dry goods.

Portland, ME — **1866**...Half the city destroyed, 10,000 people homeless.

Quebec, Canada — **1845**...1,500 buildings destroyed, many lives lost, on May 28th; and another 1,300 buildings lost in another fire one month later. **1846**...47 people died in a theatre fire. **1866**...2,500 buildings destroyed by fire.

Richmond, VA — **1811**...The Governor and other leading citizens perished in a theatre fire.

St. John's, Newfoundland — **1846**...The city nearly destroyed, and 6,000 people made homeless.

St. Louis, MO — **1849**...15 blocks of homes and 23 steamboats lost. **1851**...Major areas of the city burned with great losses.

San Francisco, CA — **1851**...2,500 buildings lost on May 3, and 500 more burned on June 22. Total loss: $6,500,000.

Seattle, WA — **1889**...Fire property losses of some $10,000,000.

Spokane, WA — **1894**...Business area ravaged by fire.

Syracuse, N.Y. — **1856**...Some 100 buildings destroyed.

Troy, N.Y. — **1854**...More than 100 houses and factories lost, same day as Milwaukee major fire.

Washington, D.C. — **1815**...Burned by the British, with great devastation. **1836**...General Post Office and Patent Office destroyed.

Fire Insurance

Students of insurance history advise us that marine insurance came first, then fire insurance, and later life insurance and various forms of specialized insurance.

According to historian A.S. Bolles, not a single building in America was covered by fire insurance before 1752. That was the year during which several Philadelphia families joined to form an organization called "The Philadelphia Contributorship for the Insurance of Houses from Loss by Fire."

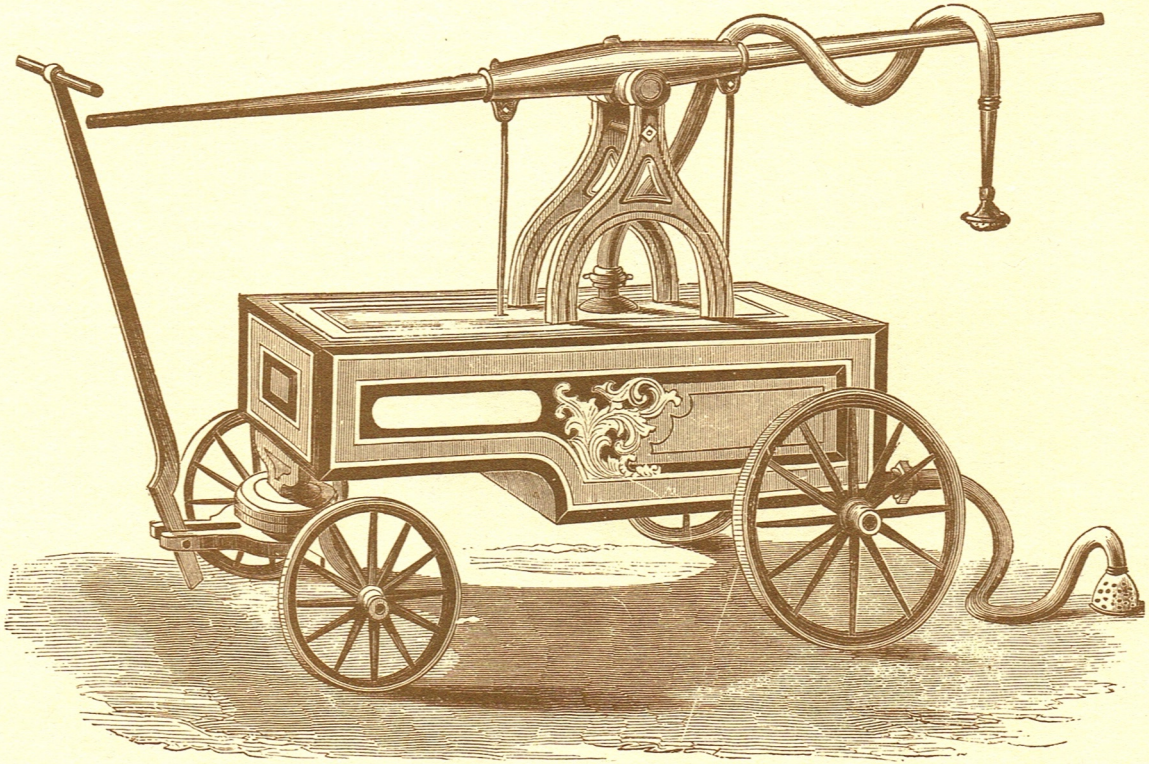
The man wishing his house insured would make a deposit of money, with losses and expenses being paid from the deposits and interest earned. The policy ran for seven years, and each member was liable for the amount of his deposit, and half as much more.

The rather long and awkward name of this organization is no doubt strange to most of us, but the name of the President of the organization is not—Benjamin Franklin.

By 1800, some nineteen fire insurance companies were doing business in the United States, including such firms as Insurance Company of North America, Massachusetts Mutual, and New York Insurance Company.

The huge New York fire of 1835 put all twenty-six New York fire insurance companies out of business, but led to the establishment of mutual insurance companies, and the broader sharing of risks. However, even with the broader risk-sharing, when one-fourth of the total property values of Chicago were wiped out by the great fire of 1871, some sixty-four of the two hundred fire insurance companies affected, failed as a result of the fire.

Nonetheless, Benjamin Franklin seemed to have a good idea, and the more recent history of fire insurance appears both more secure and more tranquil.



An old hand engine.

LOWELL LEATHER BELTING AND FIRE ENGINE HOSE MANUFACTORY,

Nos. 4 & 6 Dutton Street, Lowell, Mass.

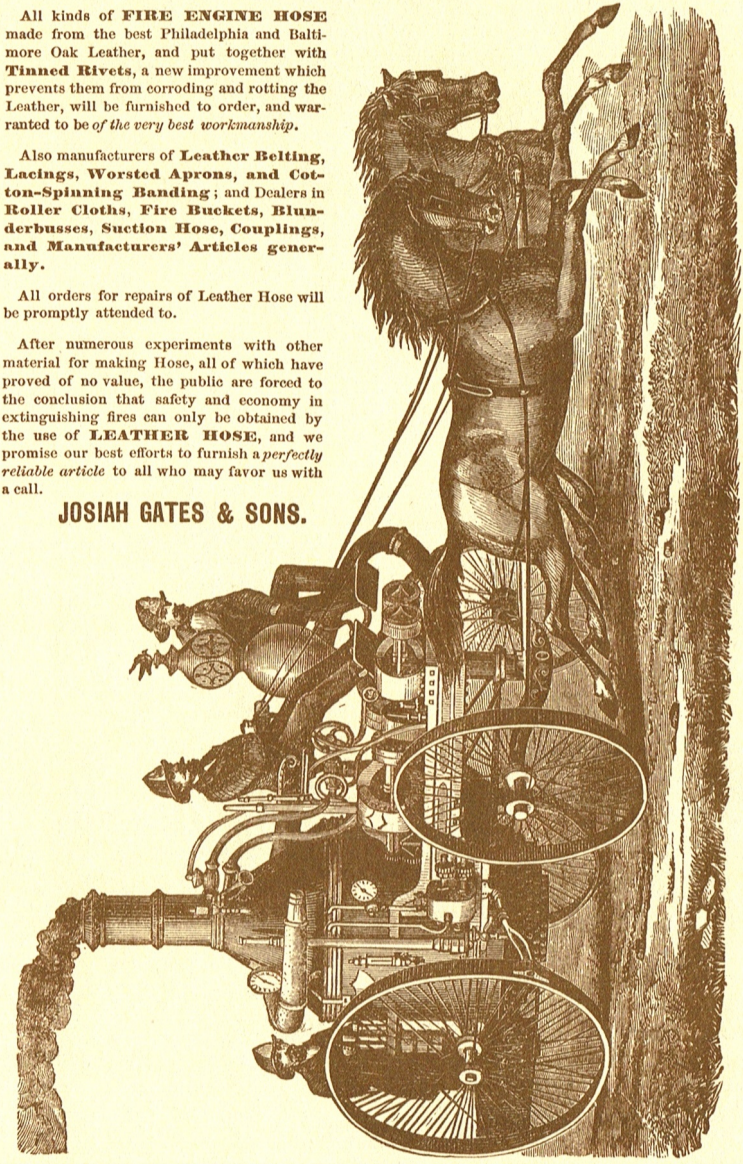
All kinds of **FIRE ENGINE HOSE** made from the best Philadelphia and Baltimore Oak Leather, and put together with **Tinned Rivets**, a new improvement which prevents them from corroding and rotting the Leather, will be furnished to order, and warranted to be *of the very best workmanship*.

Also manufacturers of **Leather Belting, Lacings, Worsted Aprons, and Cotton-Spinning Banding**; and Dealers in **Roller Cloths, Fire Buckets, Blunderbusses, Suction Hose, Couplings, and Manufacturers' Articles generally.**

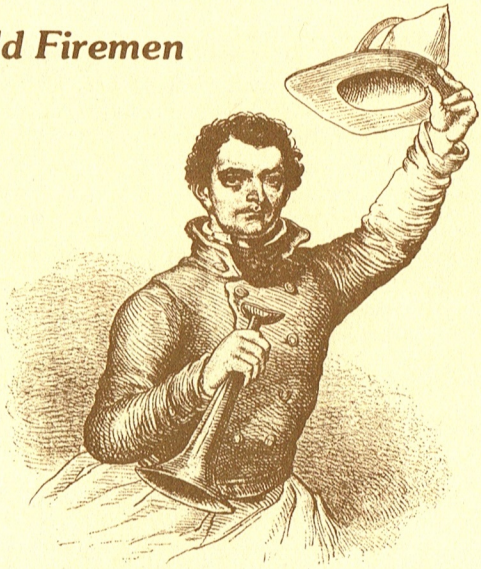
All orders for repairs of Leather Hose will be promptly attended to.

After numerous experiments with other material for making Hose, all of which have proved of no value, the public are forced to the conclusion that safety and economy in extinguishing fires can only be obtained by the use of **LEATHER HOSE**, and we promise our best efforts to furnish a *perfectly reliable article* to all who may favor us with a call.

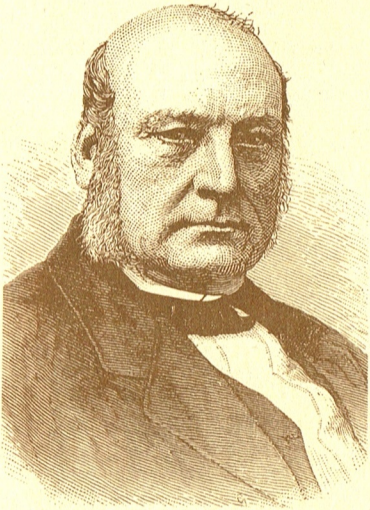
JOSIAH GATES & SONS.



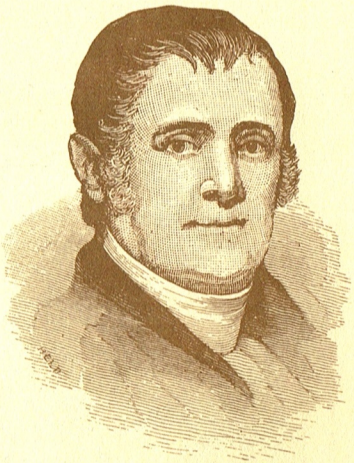
Great Old Firemen



James Gulick, Chief Engineer of New York City's Volunteer Fire Department, and hero of the 1830's.

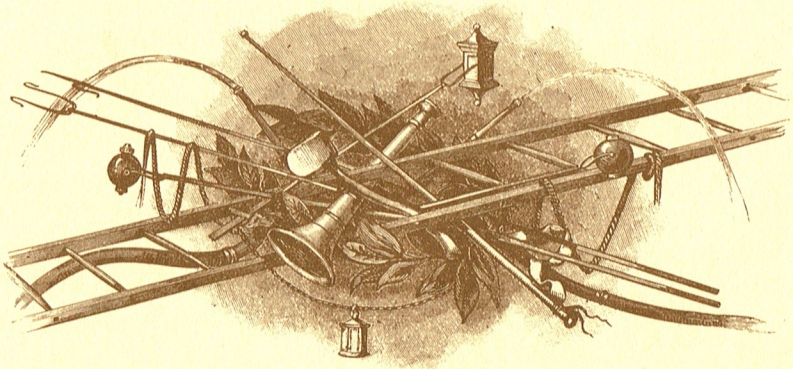


Asked what part of his life as fireman gave him the greatest pleasure, longtime fireman Carlisle Norwood replied "Upon the whole of it...there was nothing like being a fireman."



Thomas Franklin was named first Chief Engineer of N.Y.'s Volunteer's in 1799, was Chief Marshall at the Fire Department Review in honor of Lafayette's final visit to the city.

Harry Howard, last Chief Engineer of N.Y.'s old Volunteer Fire Department, from an old painting. In that era of fire fighting, the men endured not only cold, heat, rain, snow, and great risk, but exhaustion from dragging their machines block after block. Then as now the rewards for saving life and property go well beyond material values.



LONG AGO BOOKS
from
Americana Review

The Country Kitchen, 1850
Automobiles of 1904
American Advertising, 1800-1900
Mail Order Fashions, 1880-1900
Early American School Books
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Old Fashioned Picture Book
Mother Goose Rhymes
Fire Fighting of Long Ago
The ABC Coloring Book
Railway Passenger Travel, 1825-1880
Locomotive Advertising in America, 1850-1900
Children's Stories of the 1850's
Fun and Games of Long Ago
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